

A Book of Estimates of French Women

IN the volume of essays entitled *Women and the French Tradition*, by Florence Leftwich Ravenel, it is somewhat difficult to grasp precisely what the author means by the French tradition. In her preface she speaks of the heavy debt that mankind owes to the fusion of Latin and Celt which we find in France, and declares that woman in particular has her own special obligation to the people that have most loved and best understood her sex.

"The French, and they only," we are told, "have found time to consider the woman's nature and her needs, and they have put her to the most heroic uses, have drawn strength from her weakness—in a word, with consummate skill have woven her in elaborate or simple forms, in colors brilliant and soft, into the great pattern of that fabric, ancient, beautiful and imperishable, which we call the French tradition."

We suppose this imports that the French have a higher ideal of woman than obtains elsewhere; and the biographical sketches which make up the book are designed to illustrate the truth of this thesis.

Three Great Women.

Among the famous women selected by the author as illustrative of the French tradition are George Sand, Madame de Staël and Madame de Sévigné. Among the few women whose literary productions may deserve a permanent place by the sheer force and originality of the ideas they convey, she thinks that no one can be compared with the daughter of the great banker statesman Necker; yet she denies that Madame de Staël possessed

the supreme literary gift, and says that "among all French authors of anything like her importance, she is probably the least read."

In one passage of the essay on *The Great Salonière* we are regretfully told that Madame de Staël left no consummate and immortal literary monument; and in another, on the following page, we are asked to believe that her teachings have become a part of the intellectual heritage of the world. There are many similar inconsistencies in the "appreciations" contained in this book.

As to George Sand.

The author's personal judgments of great women are for the most part kindly, but she cannot resist recalling some of the unkind observations of other biographical critics. Thus in the chapter on George Sand, who is denominated *A Law Unto Herself*, we are reminded that a recent review has said that nothing can make the life of George Sand decent reading; and although this is characterized as the utterance of a muckraker, the author goes on to tell us that George Sand's great-grandfather on her father's side, King Augustus the Strong of Poland, was "a monarch whose immorality was literally Olympian and who counted his unauthorized offspring literally by the hundred."

How much more gently this is put by that genial critic James Huneker when he says: "George was named Lucile Aurora Dupin, and she was descended from a choice chain of rowdy and remotely royal ancestors."

In view of her tendency to gibe a little at her heroines, we are rather surprised that Miss Ravenel did not recall Schil-

ler's comparison of Madame de Staël to Oknos, the ropemaker of Greek mythology, who occupied himself in diligently plaiting a rope of reeds which his ass as diligently ate up. She could have found this in Carlyle's essay on Goethe, Schiller and Madame de Staël.

The Bright Cause of Dulness.

Of Madame de Sévigné, a writer who did not know how to be dull, Miss Ravenel truly says that she has inspired some of the heaviest and dreariest pages ever penned. Whether she holds the first place as a writer of familiar letters, being more picturesque than Cicero, more sincere than Voltaire and more interesting than Cowper, we do not undertake to decide; but that she has had few superiors in the art of epistolary composition no one will be found to deny. This is all the more remarkable when we remember that the letters which made Madame de Sévigné famous were not written for publication and were not in fact published until thirty years after her death.

Like Pepys, she owes her literary fame to the thoughtful and industrious interest of posterity. In 1867 Disraeli wrote to his wife: "You have sent me the most amusing and charming letter I ever had. It beats Horace Walpole and Madame de Sévigné." This illustrates the esteem in which the noble French woman's letters were held by the most competent of English literary critics half a century ago. The busier world of to-day may not turn to them quite as often; yet we can agree with the author of this book that "her work remains a legacy of joy to many generations, blooming with undimmed lustre across the centuries."

In the chapter entitled *A Woman Critic of Women* our essayist favors us with an appreciation of Madame Arvède Barine, a French writer whose works are not widely known in this country. The most notable among them appears to be a volume entitled *Portraits de Femmes*, which, we are told, contains her choicest essays and most penetrating criticism of life. Her portraits include those of St. Teresa, Jane Welsh Carlyle and George Eliot.

Madame Barine put forward a remarkable suggestion concerning George Eliot which is entirely new to us. She attributes her willingness to enter into marital relations with George Henry Lewes to the fact that George Eliot was an ugly woman!

"George Eliot," says Madame Barine, "had all the weaknesses of her sex. She was tender and generous, enthusiastic and devoted, exacting, jealous, cowardly; but the craving to hold within her hands the heart of a man had in her the peculiar intensity which it assumes in ugly women. To this was due the only serious fault of her life and its greatest mistake."

After this it is impossible to deny to Madame Barine the attribute of originality; nor are we surprised that she quotes with approval the declaration of Lord Acton that by choosing to live with Lewes George Eliot sacrificed her right to a tomb in Westminster Abbey.

Gems like these light up the pages of a bundle of essays which are otherwise extremely serious.

WOMEN AND THE FRENCH TRADITION. BY FLORENCE LEFTWICH RAVENEL. The Macmillan Company. \$1.50.

The Latest Descriptive Book on Japan

"WHAT need is there of another new book on Japan?" asks the surly critic. The same sort of need, we venture to reply, as exists from time to time for a new dictionary, a new cyclopedia or a new gazetteer. History goes on making itself from day to day and month to month and year to year.

To illustrate: The present reviewer first visited Japan in 1895, but the books which furnished him with a good introduction to the country then would hardly answer the purpose now. In the domain of Japanese history alone a good deal of water has run under the mill since 1895, and the visitor to Japan to-day could hardly afford to be ignorant of the Russo-Japanese war and the events following the Treaty of Portsmouth, in which Japan has been a participant.

History and Much Else.

This new volume on Japan, therefore, by the late Robert P. Porter, the well known journalist, serves a most useful purpose in enabling the traveller and general reader to keep up with the times. The work is divided into two parts: First, a compendium of the history of Japan from 660 B. C. to A. D. 1914, concise without dryness, and compiled with a due sense of proportion; and, secondly, an account of the physical characteristics of the empire, its population and resources and its modern development, including brief notices of Japanese art and literature.

The book was incomplete, although most of it was in type when the author died. In the preface Mr. Russell H. Porter says his father's object in writing it was to describe the main facts of Japanese history for English speaking people, and to explain how an Oriental State almost as impotent as Burmah or Siam was able in the half century from 1853 to 1903

"to outstrip all other native Asiatic Powers and to bring into being military and naval forces capable in 1904 and 1905 of defeating the whole of the Russian fleet and a large section of the Russian army." In his own introduction Mr. Robert P. Porter emphasizes the influence of Japan in the present war, showing how its entire course might have been changed if the Japanese had taken sides with Germany.

Japan's War Role.

"It is doubtful if British troops could have been safely transported from Australia, New Zealand or India to fight in Europe. A large portion of the allied fleets would have had to be stationed in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, and the danger of naval defeats in the North Sea would have been correspondingly increased. Japanese guns and gunners would not have been before Warsaw in November, 1914, and Japan, instead of being as it happened an arsenal and workshop for the Allies, would have been a base from which German and Japanese men-of-war would have preyed on their shipping."

The first notice of Japan in European literature occurs in *The Travels of Marco Polo* at the end of the thirteenth century. The map constructed from his narrative for the guidance of Christopher Columbus by Toscanelli, an Italian geographer, placed Japan, or Cipangu as it was then called, far east of its actual location, and thus misled the great discoverer when he reached the West Indies into supposing that he had actually reached the East Indies.

The existence of Japan does not appear to have been known to either Shakespeare or Bacon. Indeed, even navigators gained no actual knowledge of the country until the middle of the sixteenth century, when St. Francis Xavier made his successful visit to Japan in behalf of the Jesuits and left on record his famous estimate of the character of the people. "As far as I can judge, the Japanese surpass in virtue and probity all peoples hitherto discovered. Their character is gentle. They are no tricksters, and they reckon honor to be superior to everything else. There is a great deal of poverty in the islands. The Japanese dislike poverty, but are not ashamed of it."

There is considerable difference in the literary merit of the different parts of Mr. Porter's historical narrative. The early history is sketchy and often assumes more outside knowledge on the part of the reader than he is likely to possess, but the chapters which deal with events subsequent to the opening of Japan by

Perry in 1853-4 leave nothing to be desired. The author conveys the idea that Perry's expedition was more threatening in character than other writers have deemed it.

Perry, Gate Opener.

It is true that Commodore Perry, as an American Ambassador, conveyed President Fillmore's request that the country should be opened to commercial intercourse in a fleet of four warships, but that the Japanese themselves have not regarded his mission as unfriendly is shown in Count Okuma's *Fifty Years of New Japan*, where Mr. Suburo Shimada, a member of the Japanese Parliament, says: "The conclusion of a treaty of intercourse and commerce between Japan and the United States of America fifty-five years ago marked a new era in our history and paved the way for our present position among the great Powers of the world."

Of course Perry knew that the Shogunate Government then in power might resist his pacific mission by force, in which event he was prepared to meet it, but "thanks to the intelligent and clever diplomacy of Perry," says the same Japanese writer, America was able to secure the honor of introducing Japan to the world.

In his chapter on the physical characteristics and population of Japan we observe that Mr. Porter gives the height of Fugi Yama, the most famous of all Japanese mountains, as 12,395 feet. The figures more generally accepted as correct are 12,365 feet, the thousands corresponding to the number of months and the hundreds to the number of days in the year.

The health and physique of the Japanese people are said to have been improved by the introduction of foreign games and sports, of which baseball has appealed most successfully to popular favor, especially among the students of the schools and colleges. Mountain climbing, as practised by the English, has grown in popularity as a recreation for the leisure class.

Soldiers Wonderful Swimmers.

Swimming, which was practised with great skill under the old regime, retains its vogue, and the most wonderful achievements are described on the part of military students. While an accomplished civilian swimmer is expected to be able while treading water to hold an open fan in one hand and write a poem on it with the other, the young soldier under like conditions will will load, aim and fire his rifle at a fixed target. "He will then dive,

reload and suddenly reappear in quite a different spot, to repeat the operation."

The intending traveller to Japan, before he goes on board his steamship at San Francisco or Vancouver, will do well to provide himself with a copy of Mr. Porter's book. He will find it most helpful in those discussions in the smoking room, where it so often happens that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Furnished with this small volume and Prof. Chamberlin's *Things Japanese*, he should be able to hold his own against all ordinary fellow passengers.

JAPAN: THE RISE OF A MODERN POWER. BY ROBERT P. PORTER. Oxford University Press. \$2.25.



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